

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Union Contracts Made Battle Over Budget a Personal One

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To reach a final agreement today on a spending plan after much contentious debate, the Montgomery County Council had to reconcile not just the numbers but the unusually personal and opposite views of two members.

Valerie Ervin and Duchy Trachtenberg represented the extremes of the central budget dilemma over whether to fully fund labor contracts for public employees.

Ervin, a single mother who once relied on union benefits from a job checking groceries, was the most outspoken voice against breaking the contracts. Trachtenberg, also a union ally, backed a reduction in raises to ensure funding for services such as mental health care for people including her son, who has chronic schizophrenia.

Both have since signed on to a \$4.3 billion budget for fiscal 2009 that is scheduled for a final vote today. The compromise struck last week leaves contracts untouched, brings property tax increases of about 13 percent for the average homeowner and requires an additional \$16 million in unspecified cuts to government operations and public schools.

"At first, this was billed as being about money; in the end it was about philosophical differences, and they found a balance," said School Superintendent Jerry D. Weast, who tracked the deliberations.

Ervin (D-Silver Spring) and Trachtenberg (D-At Large) were elected in 2006 with the backing of key local labor unions but found themselves at odds over contracts that provide most general government workers with 8 percent raises.

At two emotional budget hearings, hundreds of police officers, firefighters, nurses, library aides and other workers turned out to protect their contracts. They greeted Ervin like a rock star, with cheers and a standing ovation. Trachtenberg was called a traitor, her remarks interrupted with boos and her picture featured on a "wanted" poster.

In the heat of the debate to close a shortfall of almost \$300 million, Trachtenberg told the story of her son, to make the case that union contracts should not be funded at the expense of government services.

Trachtenberg's son Wally, who is in his 30s, has been hospitalized at Manhattan Psychiatric Center in New York City since 2003 be-

cause, she said, he was failed by inadequately funded mental health services in the county.

"I look forward to the day when I can actually have my son come home and receive the services he needs in the county where I live," she said.

"There are a lot of people like my son who need services, and we can't say no to them," Trachtenberg said in a subsequent interview. "Beyond the need to fund contracts, we need to fund services. We have to strike a balance."

Ervin said that she, too, is looking ahead but that she fears that allowing the council to tamper with the contracts this year would make them an easier target next year.

"Workers become disposable," Ervin said in an interview, wiping her hands for emphasis. "And whenever there's a money problem, there will be layoffs."

To Ervin, the services Trachtenberg is committed to preserving are inseparable from the people who deliver them. Her perspective was shaped early by her mother, a union leader who worked at a Safeway store when Ervin's father was fighting in Vietnam, and later by her own experience as a young mother.

At 24, Ervin lived in subsidized housing and relied on health-care benefits for her newborn son through a part-time union job checking groceries. She became a local labor leader like her mother and was recruited to the District in the 1980s by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union. Ervin traveled around the South, organizing workers in the catfish and poultry industries in Mississippi and the Carolinas, before joining the faculty of the National Labor College.

She became chief of staff to council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) in 2002, before running for the school board in 2004 and the council two years later.

"I have a fundamental difference of opinion with those who would break contracts that were negotiated in good faith," she said in one of several budget speeches that quoted Jesse Jackson, the late Minnesota Sen. Paul Wellstone and the Bible.

After several late-night sessions, council President Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty) announced a tentative deal last week that won approval in a temperature-taking vote.

"We've had diverse, complex views," Knapp said. "We've brought those views together to hopefully achieve a common good."